

Urban growth areas

Providing Financial and Technical Resources to Build Livable and Sustainable Communities

How much space do Washington's communities need for urban growth?

Description

As communities develop their vision for the future, they are making decisions on how much land they will need for their growing population over a 20-year period.

The Growth Management Act (GMA) encourages directing population growth into urban areas. Urban growth areas (UGAs) are areas designated by a county, with input from towns and cities, where urban development is to occur.

The UGA is one of the major tools provided by the GMA for deciding where urban development should be encouraged and where the limits to that development should end. UGAs are areas where growth and higher densities are expected and supported by urban services.

By directing growth into urban areas, natural resource lands – such as farms and forests – can be conserved and the rural character of rural lands can be maintained.

Background

Incorporated cities and towns are by definition UGAs. Establishing any other areas for future urban development is a major step local communities take in managing their growth. The GMA states that urban growth should be located:

- First, in areas characterized by urban growth that have existing public facility and service capabilities.
- Second, in areas characterized by urban growth that will be served by existing and additional needed facilities and services.

Counties, in consultation with cities, assign expected population growth to UGAs. The population growth figures for each county are provided by the state Office of Financial Management. The UGAs

need to accommodate urban growth for the 20-year projected population increase.

UGAs allow efficient service provisions. Growth can be phased, with short-term growth allowed first closer to the existing urban center and other areas reserved for growth later. Establishing UGAs under the GMA has helped cities with the annexation process. When counties and cities agree on UGAs, local governments and citizens know where annexations will be occurring, reducing public controversy. Unincorporated UGAs located adjacent to cities eventually become part of the cities.

UGAs need to provide for urban densities and urban services and are to include greenbelt and open space areas.

What's being done

Most counties in the state with a set of full requirements under the GMA have completed their first comprehensive plans under the act. As part of this work, they developed criteria and made decisions about urban/rural boundaries.

Six counties in the Buildable Lands Program – Clark, King, Kitsap, Pierce, Snohomish, and Thurston – have special requirements related to UGAs. They are gathering data, at five-year intervals, on the level and type of development that is occurring. This information is to be compared to the level and type of development expected, as identified in local comprehensive plans. In 2002 the GMA was amended to allow local governments to discontinue their buildable lands work, if no state funding was provided. No state funding is currently available for this effort.

If gaps are found in this analysis, measures are to be adopted that will be likely to increase consistency during the next five-year period. Techniques other than adjusting urban growth boundaries are to be used.

What's next

Communities planning under GMA are monitoring their UGAs to determine if they are properly sized. If UGAs are filling up faster than expected or growth is occurring at lower densities than planned for, measures are to be adopted that will be likely to increase consistency.

At least every ten years, jurisdictions are required to review UGAs, including densities, and make changes, if needed [RCW 36.70A.130(3)]. The county comprehensive plan designating UGAs and the densities permitted in the UGAs by the comprehensive plans of the county and each city located within UGAs need to be revised to accommodate the urban growth projected to occur in the county for

the next 20-years.

For more information

Contact Leonard Bauer, managing director for Growth Management Services, at (360) 725-3000, or check the Web site at www.ocd.wa.gov/growth.

The following publications also are available: *Issues in Designating Urban Growth Areas, Part I: Providing Adequate Urban Area Land Supply*; *The Art and Science of Designating Urban Growth Areas, Part II: Some suggestions for Criteria and Densities*; and *Measures for Providing Attractive, Compact Urban Areas*.